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Larry Lee Interview

Ami Shah
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Ami Shah
Artist: Larry Lee
Site: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Date: 5/28/09 2:00pm

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.

Ami Shah: Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Larry Lee: I was born in Chicago but raised in South Carolina. I started college when Jimmy Carter was President and finished my undergraduate when Bill Clinton was president. I'd like to call myself back then a professional student! But it was actually my choice to go to school part time. This way, I made sure I had no debt! The truth is, I got distracted during my time in college, I was working and got married around this time so it prolonged my time in school. I majored in journalism at the University of South Carolina, before coming back to Chicago to become an Art Education major but then ran away before the second baby boom. I went into graphic design (pre-computers) then went into painting...all at UIC. Finally I ended up getting my MFA at SAIC in 1999 in sculpture.

Ami Shah: Wow! It seems like you're a pretty well rounded person!

Ami Shah: How do you identify yourself?

Larry Lee: I am what you call a renaissance man, a jack of all trades. I never divorced work from art from life. I am able to intertwine. I was a bookstore manager for 8-9 years, then worked as a picture framer and saw it as being commercial art. I was always the behind-the-scenes guy and got to see things firsthand from the other side of the counter. To me, art is an ongoing process.

Ami Shah: When, how and why did you first get involved with *DestinAsian*?

Larry Lee: In 1993 I had been out of art; I began and developed a passion for writing... so to backtrack, in 1991 my professor said to me "One day Larry, you are going to hang up your brushes." Anyway, I came upon a call for entries asking for work that was going to be selected for an Asian American exhibition. I was starting to look at who I was. This came about 5 to 7 years ago after I lived in Asia for a year. I saw stuff that made me ask and explore in my art and writing about how to be an Asian in America and vice versa, to find a community and to find about where I am now. Starting out to be part of an art show and grow.

Ami Shah: Tell me about the meaning of Orientalia?

Larry Lee: I'm glad you asked me about that. Orientalia has to do with what I call the physical and nonphysical with what people associate with being oriental. Such as cuisine..."I'm going to get chop suey or I'm going to go get curry." There is a book about the Far East and imperialism--I should tell Laura to make your class read it! It's basically about Europe subjugating of the nonWestern culture. I like that loose definition because I popularize it culturally. It looks kind of familiar while looking at stereotypes. But sometimes I do it to make fun of myself.

Ami Shah: Do you ever address Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give specific example.

Larry Lee: It's inseparable! It's how I started, my mature body of work. It started in school, maybe it's not as evident. My process involves writing, I like being lazy. I enjoy just going to movies and just sitting on my couch and watching TV. Identity for me as an Asian American is relevant as my interest in baseball. I lived in Chinatown and I'd go by old Comisky Park and watch the fireworks after the game and associate it with gunpowder in China. My work does indeed address who I am. All my work contains an Asian American theme directly or indirectly. Something more diasporic and takes times to investigate. People can pigeonhole and I've tried to expand what that can be.

Ami Shah: Tell me more about the work you did on Bruce Lee.

Larry Lee: I took two pieces of wood and transformed it by making it dysfunctional. It becomes a line which was the access form. When you draw lots of lines they connect to become one giant line. I started making it in 1999 and am still continuing today. None of my work is fixed-they can change a lot. I'm very responsive to work; I like this notion of remaking and redoing. Challenging the primacy is an awesome feeling.

Ami Shah: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian American or have you been labeled as an "Asian American artist"?

Larry Lee: Many times-that's why I went back to graduate school! These group exhibitions were often pigeonholed where the people were more interested in my explanation of work by me in-person rather than work and its message. This caused me to be very suspicious. I wanted to reinvestigate why and make work that stood up without having to be present to explain. I like the work that had no description because it didn't let people pigeonhole.

Ami Shah: What would you say was your biggest struggle?

Larry Lee: Starting off as a painter...having that, resulted in me becoming lazy and relying on instinct. I had a rude awakening when faculty took me to task. They thought I was a con-artist. Which began an introspective period where I had to reexamine what I was trying to say, I really wasn't. I had just gotten back from Asia and there was a lot I needed to talk about. I saw a different methodology that included word...text. That's when I realized I wanted to write more.

Ami Shah: Any influences?

Larry Lee: I am influenced by a lot of contemporary artists. Call attention to Donald Judd, Elsworth Kelly, and Adrian Piper... Too many artists to even remember.

Ami Shah: What are you currently working on?

Larry Lee: It's called "Stars and Stripes Forever", a series of paintings based off of food. Something nationalistic-where my stars are shurikens or martial arts throwing stars. This piece refers back to another piece, how different colors associate different pieces of experiences...expanding on a piece I showed in New York. This has been ongoing for the past 3 months and I'm trying to work with different departments. I've moved from the thinking to planning stage.

Ami Shah: I guess this concludes the interview...thank you for your time.

Larry Lee: Thank You.

END